

P. Greenspun, Roger
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 Star Conspiracy

Screen: Spy Melodrama

Johnson's 'Groundstar Conspiracy' Opens

By ROGER GREENSPUN

"The Groundstar Conspiracy," which opened rather modestly at neighborhood theaters Wednesday, is an espionage melodrama of such skill and intelligence that I should rank it not too far below Hitchcock's "Frenzy" among the few genuine pleasures in recent movies. It is equally rare in being an action film that appreciates the value of action, and of retreat from action; and if you tend (as I do) to yawn through most chases, terrors and moments of peril, it may come as a salutary surprise to learn again that there may after all be some point to dangerous excitement generated on the screen.

The film opens with an explosion triggered by the theft of secret data from a space project somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. The thief survives—just barely—but his memory does not. And when he has been pieced back together by the doctors, and analyzed and shocked and tortured almost to death, he still does not know who he is or where he came from or who hired him to sack and steal from Project Groundstar.

He has no more than a face and body—pretty much courtesy of the surgeons—a voice,

The Cast

THE GROUNDSTAR CONSPIRACY, directed by Lamont Johnson; screenplay by Matthew Howard, based on "The Alien" by L. P. Davies; director of photography, Michael Reed; film editor, Edward M. Abrams; music by Paul Hoffer; produced by Trevor Wallace; released by Universal Pictures. At neighborhood theaters. Running time: 96 minutes. This film is rated PG.

Tuxan	George Peppard
Welles	Michael Sarrazin
Nicop	Christine Belford
Plasely	Cliff Potts
Stanton	James Olson
Gossage	Tim O'Connor

unaccountably a few words of Greek, and the fleeting memory or dream of a young woman swimming in a sunlit ocean. But he also has an enemy, a man named Tuxan, security officer of the project; ruthless, humorless, wholly manipulative. And he has a friend, an unattached young woman put in his way by Tuxan, who suspects that she may be able to expose his prey.

The story that develops among these three is very rich (and slightly incredible), and there is some point in not revealing it because in "The Groundstar Conspiracy" to be surprised by what comes next really does contribute to understanding and delight. In this respect, in its concern with memory and in the beautiful precision of its editing, it looks a little like a popular variation on the great remembered-time mysteries of Alain Resnais ("Muriel," "La Chris Marker's science-fiction Guerre Est Fini," etc.) or short "La Jetée."

That is the stylistic universe of "The Groundstar Conspiracy." But its physical world—the stark, gorgeous land and seascapes of the locations on Vancouver Island and the mainland of British Columbia—are like nothing else I have seen in the movies.

As the steely, overhearing Texan, George Peppard is so efficiently hateful that it may be difficult to realize that he is also very good. Michael Sarrazin as the hapless alien, Welles, creates an unusually complete character, playing against the pathos and hysteria inherent in his role.

And Christine Belford, very lovely and virtually new to movies, brings a kind of sensible grace to a figure that is necessarily part improbability and part dream.

I have seen only two films directed by Lamont Johnson. One, "The McKenzie Break," was perhaps the best underpublicized movie of 1970. In its own way, "The Groundstar Conspiracy," equally underpublicized, seems just about as good. Mr. Johnson begins to look like one of the ornaments of the industry, and I think it more than time that he was discovered.